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A Different Way to Provide Feedback of Student Learning

Deborah Bracke, PhD • October 15, 2018

In August 2017, *Inside Higher Ed* featured [an article](#) describing a controversial “stress reduction policy” that was part of a professor’s course syllabus at the University of Georgia. The policy was intended to prevent the “profound consequences” of emotional reactions to stressful situations by allowing students to choose their own grades, opt out of group assignments, and use their books and notes for exams. The university (fueled by some heated national backlash) has since forced the professor to change his syllabus so that it is in line with more rigorous standards and practices.

I suppose that learning will always be evaluated by some sort of assessment and I certainly believe in high expectations and academic rigor. Without compelling evidence, however, I hesitate to dismiss ideas simply because they fall outside the mainstream. In fact, the idea of students assessing themselves, working independently, and using open notes for exams appeals to me. In Ken Bain’s acclaimed book, *What the Best College Teachers Do*, such practices are worthy of consideration and may even speak to a higher cause with respect to student learning.

In his benchmark for quality assessment, Bain suggests that, "...the primary goal is to help students learn to think about their own thinking so they can use the standards of the discipline or profession to recognize shortcomings and correct their reasoning as they go" (p. 160).

The limitations and frustrations of conventional assessment practices have pestered my own teaching philosophy for years. As I attempt to create rubrics that define, guide, and measure student learning, I struggle with the difference between an A- and a B+. In many instances, the algorithm is a value judgment; a value judgment that sometimes has significant consequences. Similarly, as my assignments became more complex, collaborative, and inquiry-based, I find it difficult to assign a single, uncompromised score to something so multi-dimensional.

I'm also challenged by the contextual realities that exist throughout my courses. The yardstick by which success is measured is sometimes shaped by my students themselves. I teach an increasing number of first-generation students, international students, and students who enter college with lesser levels of academic preparation. And, as my students become more diverse, so do my own attitudes and values regarding the assessment of student learning.

About five years ago, I returned a set of letter-graded papers with detailed comments that aligned with the rubric students received in advance of the assignment. It troubled me that students bypassed my written comments, immediately looked at the letter grade, and quickly crammed their work into their backpacks—it was a missed opportunity for them to consider the comments, ask questions, and use the feedback to improve their understanding of content.

A new approach

The following term, I held a class meeting during the first week and shared my hopes of creating lifelong learners with sustained intellectual curiosity, self-determination, and an open mind. I described my vision of defensible, robust understanding and a low-stakes, supportive classroom community. Knowing that my students had recently completed a course on educational assessment, I gave them a challenge: "Let's create a rubric that drives student learning but takes the pressure off the grade."

My students immediately engaged in a lively discussion and conjured up a range of possibilities. They were not only grateful for this opportunity to brainstorm, but my students were also developing a deeper appreciation for assessment itself—something that typically did not have that much of an intrinsic appeal. Here is what we/they created (I have been using it ever since):

- **Snorkel**—Student demonstrates a *deep* understanding of content; connections between assigned readings, class discussion, and additional liberal arts classes are *crystal clear*; student *explores* issues and ideas; student is *well-equipped and well-prepared*; effort and exertion is *notable*.
- **Surf**—Student demonstrates a thirst for exploration but doesn't quite achieve it; connections between assigned readings, class discussion, and additional liberal arts classes are a bit *muddy*; student *skims the surface* of issues and ideas; student is *adequately equipped*; effort and exertion is *discernable*.
- **Float**—Student is in *survival mode*; student is *paddling* through the assignment with a *shallow* understanding of content; connections between assigned readings, class discussion, and additional liberal arts classes are *aimless*; effort and exertion is *adrift*.
- **Sink**—Student demonstrates *no real interest in surviving*; floatation devices have been offered, but they have not been accepted.

Now, some may argue that these standards are not clear and quantifiable, but they are easily tweaked (both descriptively and prescriptively) for each assignment and final grades are determined using a point system that is shared with students in advance. Surprisingly, I am impressed by how rapidly their pursuit of “points” is soon forgotten. Within the first week of the term, there appears to be an immediate shift towards the *process* of learning. Students read my comments more carefully and are more eager to discuss what a “snorkel” might look like. Students also report that feedback is more personally relevant and is more closely aligned with “real life experiences.” They also like my emphasis on the big ideas as opposed to more atomized skills and knowledge.

I’ve noticed that my students are taking more risks with their assignments—and they note that they feel “safer” in taking those risks. Finally, I have detected a change in our classroom culture. There appears to be more interaction and discussion of learning goals. I am hopeful that these conversations and the feedback I provide will lead to further self-examination and self-evaluation so that our teacher candidates can be better prepared for their own professional practice.

Although there are certainly no statistical or evidence-based underpinnings that point to the efficacy of this assessment practice, I do consider this approach to providing feedback more meaningful, more collaborative, more empowering, and more fun—for my students and me.

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